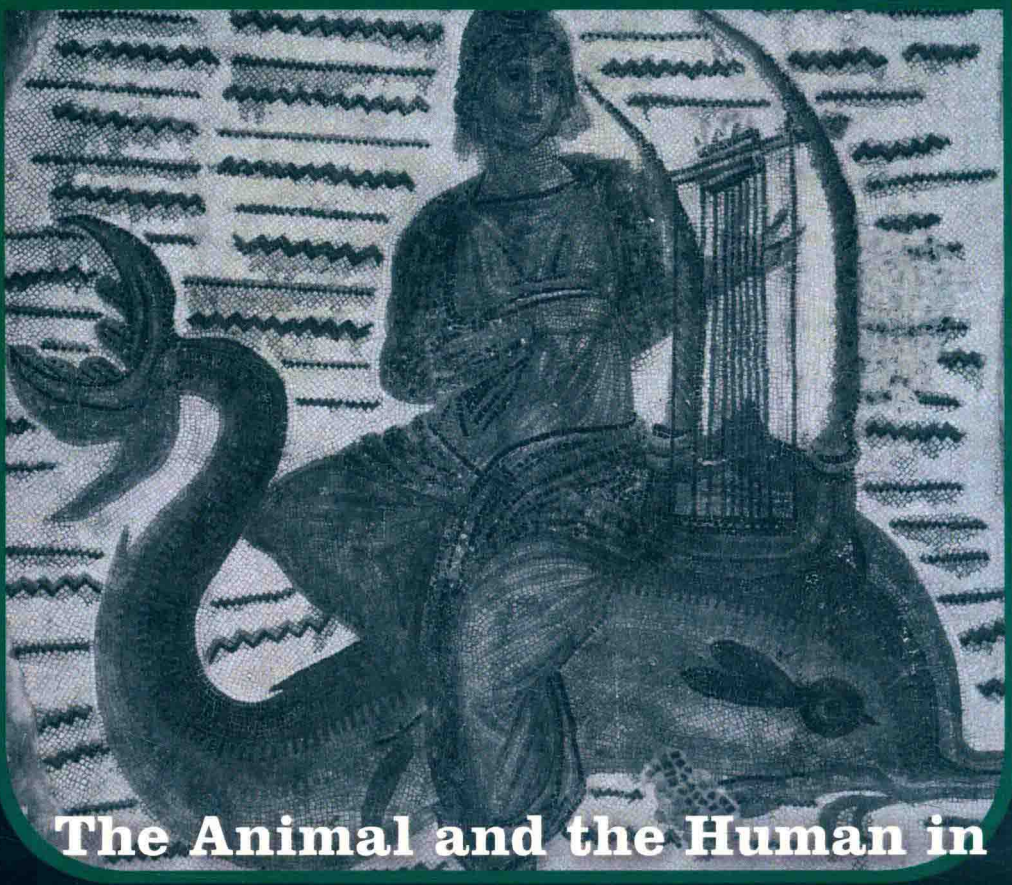

The Animal and the Human in Ancient and Modern Thought

The 'Man Alone of Animals' Concept

Stephen T. Newmyer

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The Animal and the Human in Ancient and Modern Thought

This is the first book-length study of the "man alone of animals" *topos* in classical literature, not restricting its analysis to Greco-Roman claims of humans' intellectual uniqueness, but including classical assertions of their physiological and emotional uniqueness. It supplements this analysis of ancient manifestations with an examination of how the commonplace survives and has been restated, transformed and extended in contemporary ethological literature and in the literature of the animal rights and animal welfare movements. Author Stephen T. Newmyer demonstrates that the anthropocentrism detected in Greek applications of the "man alone of animals" *topos* is not only alive and well in many facets of the current debate on human–animal relations, but that combating its negative effects is a stated aim of some modern philosophers and activists.

Stephen T. Newmyer is Professor in the Department of Classics at Duquesne University, USA. He is author of several books and articles, most recently *Animals, Rights, and Reason in Plutarch and Modern Ethics* (Routledge, 2006) and *Animals in Greek and Roman Thought: A Sourcebook* (Routledge, 2011).

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For Sophie
gentle loving Other

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Preface

As early as the eighth century BCE, Greek philosophers speculated on the nature of the human animal and on humans' relationship to other animals.[1] Their attempts to define the human being frequently led them to isolate capacities and endowments that they declared to be unique to humans. In his study of the development of anthropocentrism among the Greeks, classical scholar Robert Renehan observed that, by the fourth century BCE, the definition of "man" as a rational animal differing from other animals because of his intellectual faculties was regularly encountered in philosophical texts. This stock definition, endlessly repeated, is in Renehan's view less interesting in itself than are the numerous observations concerning various dimensions of the human intellect that the Greeks set forth in phraseology so formulaic that, taken together, they constitute what he has termed "a distinct *topos*, which one might describe as the 'μόνον τῶν ζῴων ἄνθρωπος' ['*monon tōn zōiōn anthrōpos*,' 'man alone of animals'] *topos*."[2] Enumerations of specific examples of human uniqueness that occur in Greek authors, Renehan argues, so often employed the verbal formula "man alone of animals" to distinguish the nature of man from that of other animal species that the phrase itself became a cliché in Greek and eventually in Roman philosophical and scientific literature.

The vast majority of the "man alone of animals" claims examined in Renehan's study pertain to aspects of man's *intellectual* make-up in his status as a rational creature: man alone of animals, it was variously claimed, has reason, has memory, has beliefs, has an articulate language, has a self-image and so on. In addition, Renehan devotes brief attention to what he calls "anatomical and physiological features which are peculiar to 'man alone of animals.'"[3] A third type of the "man alone of animals" claim advanced by Greek authors, that which pertains to man's *emotional* dimension, scarcely figures in Renehan's analysis. Nor does he take note of the small but vocal group of ancient thinkers who raised objections to claims of the "man alone of animals" type, whether made in connection with man's intellectual, physiological or emotional properties, and who maintained that differences between human beings and other animals should be viewed in at least some cases not as a matter of "all or nothing," but rather as a question of degree, and that such differences may best be considered quantitative rather than qualitative in nature.

Just as Renehan's analysis takes minimal account of ancient discussions of the physiological and emotional characteristics of the human being, so does he totally leave out of discussion post-classical assertions of human uniqueness. The present volume seeks to remedy this shortcoming by offering an analysis of the power and persistence of the ancient formula "man alone of animals," used in assertions of human uniqueness, by examining how it was born and nurtured, how it was applied and at times rejected by classical authors, and how it survives and influences discourse on human–animal relations in the twenty-first century. Although Greco-Roman views on the *intellectual* advantages enjoyed by "man alone of animals" have been commented upon by scholars in a variety of contexts, classical pronouncements on the *physiological* and, especially, on the *emotional* dimensions of human beings have been slighted by scholars despite the importance of their contribution to a complete picture of the classical view of the human animal vis-à-vis other species. I hope to show that the ancient "man alone of animals" formula, restated, transformed and extended, is alive and well today in the debates of philosophers of cognition, ethicists, neuroscientists and cognitive ethologists, those biologists who investigate the mental lives of non-human animals.[4]

Particularly noteworthy, in discussion of the afterlife of this ancient verbal formula, is the striking degree to which classical arguments and examples resurface in twenty-first-century philosophical and scientific discourse relating to human–animal interactions. Attention to modern applications of the "man alone of animals" formula has more than mere antiquarian interest. It is scarcely an exaggeration to state that two millennia of disregard for and maltreatment of non-human animals by human beings have been influenced and often justified by appeals to assertions of the "man alone of animals" type by proponents of an aggressive faith in what is often labeled "human exceptionalism," and to maintain that the work of some animal advocates in various disciplines has in recent decades been inspired in part by a desire to combat the negative effects of this mindset upon the lives of non-human species.

I do not claim to provide in this volume a general history of appearances of the "man alone of animals" formula since I concentrate on its manifestations in classical antiquity and in debate and discourse on human–animal relations in the twentieth century and into the present century. Nor do I attempt to catalogue and discuss every extant ancient appearance of the formula, whether in reference to human beings' intellect, physiology or emotions, since my focus is on the uses to which it was put and on the effects that appeals to it continue to have.[5] Since my approach is thematic rather than historical, ancient occurrences of the "man alone of animals" formula are regularly juxtaposed with instances in current discourse to underline the remarkable tenacity of the ideas that underlie the formula and the striking similarity of the consequences for human action that have arisen from its application in ancient and contemporary thinkers.

I hope that this work may be of value to the growing number of classical scholars who have an interest in the complex and varied roles that non-human species played in the lives of human beings in the classical world and who may have

encountered some ancient examples of the "man alone of animals" formula used with reference to the intellectual advantages of humans over other animals species, but who may be less familiar with such claims when applied to the physiological and emotional dimensions of the human being, and who may likewise be unaware of the use of such claims in modern philosophical and scientific discourse. Because I hope that this work may prove illuminating to non-classicists as well, in particular to philosophers and scientists who, without recognizing its ancient origin, may have employed or opposed assertions of the "man alone of animals" type in works delineating the excellences and shortcomings of humans and other animals, I have transliterated all Greek philosophical terms of a technical nature that appear in the text in Greek letters, and I have translated or paraphrased all citations from Greek and Latin authors. For these readers, I have occasionally described ancient authors and the contents of their works in greater detail than might seem necessary to scholars of classical literature. Although Greek and Roman claims of the "man alone of animals" type are found predominantly in philosophical and scientific texts, some of the more eloquent and intriguing examples appear in poetic, dramatic and historical works, and I have included discussion of these where appropriate.

Notes

1 On Homeric, Hesiodic and pre-Socratic attempts to characterize and classify human beings and other animals, see Chapter 2, pp. 11–15.

2 Robert Renehan, "The Greek Anthropocentric View of Man," *HSCPh* 85 (1981) 246. In classical rhetorical theory, the term *topos* (Greek, "place," "commonplace"; Latin, *locus, locus communis*) designated a "place" from which a speaker could derive material useful in persuading his audience. Cicero (*De Inventione* [*On Invention*] II. 47) defines *loci* as "arguments that can be transferred to many cases" (*argumenta quae transferri in multas causas possunt*). He lists (II. 50), as examples of *loci* appropriate to murder trials, such notions as whether or not one should place confidence in witnesses; whether one should consider the defendant's past life; and whether one should give special attention to the issue of motive.

In post-classical usage, the term *topos* has come to be used predominantly of literary clichés and commonplace ideas repeated and elaborated in various contexts. One familiar *topos* that scholars isolate is that of the *locus amoenus* or "pleasant locale," used in descriptions of landscapes and gardens since the time of Homer. A classic exposition of the varieties and function of *topoi* in classical and post-classical literature is found in Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973; transl. by Willard R. Trask), especially pp. 79–110. The essays in Lynette Hunter, ed., *Toward a Definition of Topos: Approaches to Analogical Reasoning* (London: Macmillan, 1991), provide helpful guidance toward understanding the difficult concept of *topos*.

3 Renehan 248–249.

4 Zoologist and ethologist Frans deWaal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) 33–34, observes that the term "ethology" arose in the 1940s when it was perceived necessary to distinguish the study of animals in wild surroundings from that carried out in the confines of the laboratory. "Ethology" was chosen to designate the study of animals in natural settings unfettered by the artificial conditions of the laboratory. Philosopher Gary Steiner, in *Animals and the Moral Community: Mental Life, Moral Status, and*

Kinship (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) 4–6, notes that recent years have witnessed a shift from emphasis on "behavioral ethology", which focuses on the study of outward, observable behavior of animals, to concentration on "cognitive ethology," which seeks to understand the internal mental lives of animals in an attempt to determine whether non-human species experience such mental phenomena as beliefs, perceptions, desires, reflection and choice.

5 Renehan's article provides, somewhat in the manner of a catalogue, extensive examples of appearances of the "man alone of animals" *topos* in Greek literature through the Byzantine period, with special attention to claims of the intellectual uniqueness of human beings, but he acknowledges (252) that, even with this generous sampling of examples, "It would not be difficult to quadruple these specimens."

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defense of the concept of human uniqueness based upon repeated if implicit assertions of the "man alone of animals" type analyzed, in their classical manifestations, in Renehan's study.

Smith's catalogue of human achievements assumes, in the manner of the Greeks, that humankind's uniquely favored position in the hierarchy of animal-kind arises primarily from their superior *intellectual* capacities, and that, in the manner of at least some Greeks, this uniquely favored position in creation has moral consequences for human action: only human beings, precisely because they *are* human, possess moral agency which imparts both rights and duties uniquely to them. Humans must determine their obligations to other animal species but, in Smith's view, one cannot correctly speak of rights or wrongs in connection with non-human animals. As irrational creatures, non-human animals can no more have rights or duties toward us or toward each other than we can toward them.[6] Smith's conviction that moral worth and intellectual superiority are closely intertwined becomes clear when he attempts to refute the potential objection that pre-rational infants and cognitively impaired humans cannot have rights, by asserting that the entire human species has moral worth and "not just individuals who happen to possess rational capacities."[7] He cites authorities who support his belief that human beings are by their nature rational beings who can neither acquire nor lose that nature. Humans either inhabit or could potentially inhabit the moral realm, and are therefore unlike any species that does not have even the capacity to develop rationality. Moral agency, in Smith's view, is possessed by the human species and not just by its rationally functioning members.

Smith winds up this somewhat abstract line of argument with a reminder to his readers that the overriding purpose of his book is a practical one, namely, to defeat the anti-human agenda of the animal rights movement which would topple humankind from its favored place in creation if it is allowed to prevail. The animal rights debate is, in his estimation, a *human* debate about the nature of our responsibilities toward other animal species that arise exclusively from our nature as humans. Ironically, he concludes, the animal rights debate provides "proof of the unique nature of the human species, or what some call 'human exceptionalism.'"[8]

An earlier, more logically rigorous presentation of some of the ideas introduced in Smith is offered in philosopher Mortimer J. Adler's treatise, *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes*, the title of which suggests that its author may already at the outset have come down on the side of "human exceptionalism." This conclusion is reinforced by Adler's assurance that his book seeks to determine "how man differs from everything else in the universe . . . "[9] Central to Adler's inquiry is the determination of whether humans differ from other animals in *kind* or in *degree,* since the answer to this fundamental question may have practical consequences for humans' treatment of other species.[10] Although Adler asserts that the answer to his question will require input from both science and philosophy since neither is, in his time, by itself adequate to the task, his argument owes very little to animal behavioral studies and relies rather heavily upon logical deduction, as he grapples with issues of superficiality and radicality of difference in kind between animal species.

In Adler's explanation of the concept, one creature differs from another in *kind* if it possesses a property that other creatures do not. Hence vertebrates have some bodily structures that differ in kind from those of invertebrates. Conversely, if one thing has more of a quality that another does possess, the one is said to differ from the other only in *degree*, as one bird differs from another in speed of flight. To assert that humankind differs only in *degree* from other animals, one would need to provide evidence that all other creatures, and even machines, in Adler's view, can perform all actions that humans can, in either a greater or lesser degree than is the case with humankind.[11] To prove, however, that humankind differs *radically in kind*, one must demonstrate that humans perform some acts not performed at all by other living beings, in consequence of the presence in humans of some unique power or factor. At this point in his argument, Adler shows his debt to Greek speculation on the place of humankind in animal creation, as he observes that Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics including Marcus Aurelius, and Saint Augustine all taught that humankind differs *radically in kind* from other creatures.[12] All of these thinkers, he continues, attributed the radical difference in kind to the intellect, reason, thought and understanding of human beings, as these are manifested in their achievements in the arts, sciences, law and literature. Adler's catalogue of unique achievements that derive from human intellect bears a striking similarity to that of Smith, as Adler declares,

> Only men make laws; only men make sentences; only men read, write and make speeches; only men build and operate machines; only men paint pictures that have some representative meaning; only men engage in religious worship; only men cook their food; only men walk erect; and so on.[13]

This radical difference in kind is attributable, in Adler's view, specifically to humankind's possession of what the philosopher terms "propositional language," which allows for their unique capacity for conceptual thought.[14] Adler is willing to allow that other animal species may have perceptual thought, which prompts their conditioned responses to life situations, and may have as well some degree of memory which prompts their reactions to stimuli, but he insists that only humans employ symbolic language that allows them to draw conclusions from their surroundings and to think abstractly.

The possibility that humans differ radically in *kind* from all other animal species has profound theoretical and practical consequences for Adler that recall Smith's conclusions. If humans are unique in kind in the animal world, they deserve special treatment that is based on their difference from other species. Humans cannot be used as a *means*, and their liberty and life must be respected.[15] Adler claims that humans have always interpreted the "observation that they alone have the power of speech as signifying not only a psychological difference in kind between themselves and the brutes, but also the psychological superiority of their own kind."[16] An inferior creation ought to be controlled by a superior creation, he maintains, and to be treated as a means to an end, as instruments of human welfare. Again, he cites Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the early Christians, as advocates of this

position, bringing his argument back around to the Greeks whom he had early on in his work cited in defense of his position.[17] Adler is careful to forestall the objection that fully rational human beings might have the right to exploit rationally impaired humans, by arguing, as would Smith, that all human beings differ from one another only in *degree*, not in *kind*, since one group of humans contains the same sort of beings that other groups contain, despite any shortcomings in one or the other group. A particularly intriguing conclusion that Adler draws from this line of argument, which he unfortunately leaves undeveloped, is that any proof that humans differ in *kind* from other creatures tends to support the Christian view of "man."[18]

The starkly anthropocentric visions of animal creation offered by Smith and Adler have much in common, both in the striking similarity of their catalogues of uniquely human achievements made possible by humankind's superior intellect, and in the sweeping conclusions that they draw concerning the inherent moral primacy of human beings that this intellectual superiority bestows. They likewise share two noteworthy omissions: neither makes more than a passing reference to Greco-Roman contributions to the line of argument that they advance, and both appear equally oblivious to counterarguments in scientific and philosophical literature contemporary with their own work. As we shall note in subsequent chapters, at least half of Smith's claims of human uniqueness and a number of Adler's have parallels in Greco-Roman philosophy and natural history, in authors who either assert that one or another of these achievements is in fact unique to "man alone of animals," or who, in contrast, reject that claim.

The anthropocentric mindset that distinguishes works like those of Smith and Adler has been subjected in recent years to searching criticism in works that ask whether such a mindset may be allowed to persist in a world both blessed by remarkable advances in the sciences and beset by numerous challenges. In his historical survey of anthropocentric thought in the west, Dieter Lau, focusing in particular upon the ecological challenges of the modern world, asks whether nature has its own moral values or whether, on the other hand, it exists solely for humankind.[19] In endeavoring to answer this question, Lau offers a detailed history of the remarkably persistent idea that the human is, as the title of his work suggests, the "center of the world" (*Mittelpunkt der Welt*). Lau laments the fact that scholars have consistently ignored classical perspectives on this question, in the belief that the human's desire to conquer earth and its creatures finds its origins in Christianity, and he reminds his readers of the Stoic coloring of early Christian pronouncements on humankind's relation to the natural world.[20] In Lau's view, only analysis of classical sources can elucidate the origin of the notion that the human is in fact the real purpose of creation, a premise still widely accepted, he notes, despite recent findings in biology and psychology.[21]

Lau argues that the rise of this anthropocentrism, in its classical and post-classical manifestations, is derived from two inter-related components, the first of these being the idea that the human stands somehow outside of the totality of nature and, being freed from it, exercises control over it. Since they work *on* nature, humankind is an active agent, whence emerges Lau's second component,

that of the human's "self-creation." Humans eventually conclude that they are the purpose of creation.[22] They have thereby a sort of "cultural specialness" alluded to in Greek myth, philosophy and theology. The human's "exceptionalism" is not limited, however, to having a function as a kind of "culture hero," but extends as well to the recognition that humans have certain biological and intellectual features that accord them their "biological exceptionalism."[23] Lau concludes his theoretical introduction to the topic of the origins of anthropocentrism with a cautionary observation that we must be careful to distinguish whether that mindset is after all a mark of human self-perception in general, or rather just a priority of Greco-Roman and biblical-Christian thought.[24]

Lau's study reveals both an intimate engagement with classical sources that espouse an anthropocentric world view, a feature which, as we have noted, is absent from Adler's and Smith's presentations, and a broad familiarity with recent biological, in particular ecological, thought on issues relating to the place of humankind in creation. His study succeeds in demonstrating that the Greek idea that humankind occupies a unique place in the hierarchy of nature, and that the rest of nature is made to serve him, still thrives in theoretical treatises that bear traces of influence from evolutionary theory.[25] Like Adler, Lau ends his work with reflections on the potential moral consequences arising from the conclusion that humankind occupies a unique place in creation, although Lau asks sharply differing questions: is it possible that other animal species have their own goals, and that they have the right to realize their own ends? If so, do humans owe justice to non-human species?[26] The reader comes away from Lau's work questioning the confident assertions of human supremacy with which Adler's and Smith's works conclude: does it after all matter, Lau asks, whether "man alone of animals" is in any way unique, or do the demands and needs of the totality of creation, whether we call that "nature" or "earth," take precedence?

Lau's final questions here constitute an utter repudiation of the aggressive anthropocentrism evident in Adler and Smith, although, as do they, Lau views the issue of humankind's uniqueness, central to the anthropocentric position, as predominantly a factor of *intellectual* primacy, even if Lau does allude to humans' supposed "biological exceptionalism."[27] The notion of "biological exceptionalism" has itself been under attack in recent decades from some scientists, prominent among whom is evolutionary biologist and ardent Darwinist James Rachels. Rachels argues that Darwin's evolutionary theory has undermined the traditional view of "man" created in the image of God and of "man" as a uniquely rational being.[28] The conclusion that Rachels draws from this line of argument is far more radical than that of Lau, as he asserts, "If Darwinism is correct, it is unlikely that any other support for the idea of human dignity will be found."[29] Human life will henceforth need to be devalued and value will be granted to non-human life, as humans are forced to rethink their treatment of animals. Darwin, Rachels notes, believed that even worms possess some intelligence, in consequence of which he concluded that the difference between humans and other animal species "is only one of degree, not of kind."[30]

While Rachels notes that Darwin considered the linguistic capacities of human beings vis-à-vis those of other animal species to be properly viewed as

only a matter of degree, he doubts that language experiments involving animals, including those in which primates have apparently been taught American Sign Language, are valid proof of linguistic ability in animals, and he agrees with those who have charged that such experiments may involve cueing. He agrees with Darwin, however, that to deny rationality to animals assumes a sharp break between humans and other species, and the existence in humans of characteristics that exist nowhere else in nature, an assumption that evolutionary theory fails to support.[31] Hence, Rachels concludes, we cannot assume that "man alone"[32] is rational. The notion of "human dignity" becomes obsolete, and the attendant idea that humankind and other animal species occupy different moral categories will need to be rejected.[33] For Rachels, as for Lau, species membership is unimportant, and humans must accord equal consideration to the welfare of all creatures. The only acceptable morality that can emerge in a world in which human beings do not occupy a morally superior position will be that built upon what Rachels terms "moral individualism," which takes into account the relative unimportance of species membership.[34]

Some recent scholars have developed the evolutionary approach observable in Rachels to argue that the anthropocentric world view may in time become obsolete. Historian of anthropocentric thought and specialist in human–animal interactions Rob Boddice acknowledges that anthropocentrism has "provided order and structure to humans' understanding of the world, while unavoidably expressing the limits of that understanding. It influences our ethics, our politics, and the moral status of Others."[35] Yet, he argues, anthropocentrism may have outlasted its usefulness as the tension with nature, with non-human animals and with the environment inherent to the concept becomes increasingly evident. We may need to redefine what it means to be human and to rethink how humans are properly to be viewed alongside animal Others, an endeavor which may necessitate a reconsideration of precisely what *anthropos* means in the term "anthropocentrism."[36]

Boddice's thesis that anthropocentrism may be on its way to obsolescence is developed in a disturbing direction by philosopher of technology Langdon Winner, who observes, citing the concept that humankind is the tool-making species, a position that many mid-twentieth-century anthropologists singled out as the factor that led to social organization and cultural advancement for humanity, that in some "posthuman" critical discourse, humankind and its tools are seen as finally merging.[37] Some would say, in light of the enormous technological advances of the past half century, from telephones to nuclear bombs to computers, that humans and their inventions are no longer separate entities, but are becoming a race of "transhumans," what some call hybrids or cyborgs. That is, we are on the road to artificial human beings.[38] Winner sees the remedy to this frenzied quest to exceed human bounds to lie in a reconsideration of what it means to be human, in a refocusing on our good nature and on our human decency.[39]

In her work *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*, philosopher Mary Midgley takes up some of the questions tackled by Rachels the evolutionary biologist and Boddice the philosopher of technology and asks whether perhaps, in the final analysis, "difference" is not to be considered as a sign of superiority or